

Rural Sunset: Periphery and Nostalgia in the Landscapes of Contemporary Israeli Cinema

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Introduction

In Nachum Gutman's book *The Orange Peel Path: Adventures from the Early Days of Tel Aviv* the storyteller asks a boy he meets by chance a few years after the events described:

"So what was the Orange Peel Path like?" "Which path?" asks the lad.

"Orange peel."

"Which peel?"

"Orange."

"Ah! You call it 'the Orange Peel Path'?"

I tell him "yes", and in my heart I wonder how to explain that this was no ordinary path, that today it is more like a symbol for me. A symbol of deeds which can and should be done.¹

The Orange Peel Path then, is no ordinary path, but a symbol of nostalgia for "deeds which can be done and should be done".²

Orange peels in this exalted form are traces which every messenger should leave in his wake in order to enable some body else to follow in his footsteps and in those of others who undertook secret missions in the British Mandate times, and under British military rule during the First World War. For the narrator, the Orange Peel Path signifies an adventurous past, an ephemeral, innocent Israel, although his encounter with characters from the past emphasizes his inability to reach that past, so that all that is left to him is longing. Not only the narrator, but Gutman as well, expresses in his a book his yearnings for the past while at the same time stressing the impossibility of returning to days gone by. The concept of an "Orange Peel Path" is exposed, then, in three phases: the creation of the trail agents who walk it; a search for those activists using the road-signs created by the peels and longings for the creation of the path and the activism it symbolizes. If so, the Orange Peel Path embodies a kind of nostalgia. It stands for what the Land of Israel was before the establishment of the State, or what we would like to see in it, or to use Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran's terms in their discussion of place, "the distance between Israel as a "small", physical place and Israel as a "big" place', which is "more than a particular site, even more than all sites: it is the idea itself."³ In this sense, the Orange Peel Path is not just a random path, but also a mythical one, along which we may, if we wish, reach the old, cherished Land of Israel, wrapped in the scent of citrus blooms. The Orange Peel Path, it appears, is the Israeli incarnation of the Yellow Brick Road. If we could only discover the right path, we would find, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* that "there's no place like home."⁴

In this article I would like to sketch the Orange Peel Path in the paths and streets of development towns, the neighborhoods and villages in the Israeli periphery, as they are portrayed in contemporary Israeli cinema. I intend to examine the way in which landscape is portrayed using its pathways an elegy for an Israel which is fast disappearing. Many of the films made in Israel in recent years create a dialogue between the rural periphery and the urban center of the country; between past and present; between the younger and the older generations, with the path featuring in their topographical poetics. One recalls such films as Doron Tzabari and Dorit Rabinian's *Shuli's Boyfriend*⁵ in which an ice-cream seller, who is a Likud party supporter, flees along the paths of Or Yehuda strewn with Labor party voting slips, sheltering behind an assumed identity. He suggests to one of his female relatives that she join him on a journey to a better future in his ice-cream van. There is also *The Police Investigator*⁶, Ram Levi's television drama from 2002 in which an Arab-Israeli police inspector wanders along the paths of a village and searches in its dairies, in order to solve a murder mystery. The solution rouses questions as to the legitimacy of the leasehold the founders had on land of the village had. Tsahi Grad's *Giraffes*⁷ tells of a girl who escapes from the Tel Aviv melee taking on a false identity, leaving a trail behind her in an orchard. In *The Brown Girls*,⁸ Irit Linur and Ran Carmeli's television series, romance and conflict are woven between the paths of the village, when a newcomer becomes the head of the village council and manages to persuade the locals to sell their land.

Though these films provide the background for my study, in order to examine and exemplify the way in which paths and roads function in Israeli society and culture, I will focus in this article on three other films in which the periphery stands at the center of the plot s: *As Tears Go By* directed by Eitan Green⁹; *Saint Clara* directed by Ari Folman and Ori Sivan¹⁰ and *A Small Country, A Big Man* a television drama directed by Avraham Heffner¹¹ (1998). At the hand of these films I intend to examine the analogy between cinematic inscription of territory and the path as part of an ongoing negotiation of Israeli identity.

As I hope to show, paths in these films constitute an ongoing dialogue with the Orange Peel Path, which operates as their mythical path. Henri Lefebvr noted that space serves not only to enclose but also reflects social order. The key to understanding society is in its organization of space, although this may be hidden by its unfelt, that is to say realistic presence, so that the organization is not immediately apparent.¹² In this sense, landscape is not only conceptual or visual, it is planned. In cinema, we might add that someone is always gazing on the landscape. The lens of the camera sets the landscape in a frame. Its inscription within the frame and in relation to it is what tells us the story of a place. In this context one might understand the term "photography" as topographical poetics, or photography.

Paths

I walk the gravel path
Its familiar twists and turns
And once again I think it's the same cricket singing
Singing under the sabra bush.¹³

In the films I will discuss here, I want to trace the way in which the path functions as a device or image that connects the events of the film with the past, revealing a range of meanings. To do that, I will examine paths, first of all as routes leading from one particular point in space to another. Secondly, we could wonder about the human activity taking place on the path: which coordinates define it? Under which conditions one might pursue it? I follow the significance of human activity in the context of the inner, diegetic world of the film.

The paths in *As Tears Go By* are in a rural village, and an intercity road linking the village to other towns and villages. The protagonist, Yitzchak, travels the path ketched out for him in advance; his aim is to obtain a driving license, which will enable him to drive along the path legally. In *Saint Clara* both the main road in a southern development town as well as the corridors of the local school are designated to the townspeople, its teachers and students at the school, although the residents of the town prefer to sketch an alternative route for themselves. The paths and roads in *A Small Country*, *A Big Man* are scattered throughout Israel. At the center of events is a police unit in Jerusalem, but the key to the detective puzzle is to be found in the village of Shoeva, where Avraham (Bruhama) Angel lives. He is an Alzheimer patient wandering the paths of the nearby wadi in search of the past, and the father of Rachelle who is conducting a police investigation

Following Michel de Certeau we may identify human movements in the landscape, not only as a presence in space but also in a way analogous to the action of the tongue in language, as a sort of Austinian 'speech act', we can define as an inscription in space.¹⁴ This is a process of appropriation of the topographical method, by which the human body inscribes its contract with a place. In this sense, the road can be permitted or forbidden, indispensable or optional, and human activity on the road may examine it, respect or resist its boundaries. Therefore, the distinction between a preexisting path and a route which is created as a result of human activity, is of special significance here. The particular activities which characterize, each of the films, are discernable at first glance. In *As Tears Go By* disciplined path and its traffic must be learned. In *Saint Clara* both in the case of the residents of the town who lie down on the railway tracks, and the children who march through the swamp water, human activity takes place along paths which run counter to the route of the road. *A Small Country*, *A Big Man* describes a third kind of path which acts as an anchor for memory and forgetting.

Road-signs

"Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it."¹⁵

There are no less than fourteen driving sequences on *As Tears Go By*, including Yitzchak's preparations for his driving test and the test itself, as well as driving to a communal singsong evenings which Yitzchak and his father organize together with the singer Anat, performing songs of the old Israel, naturally, among them "A Difficult Parting", "Lushinka" and "A Sad Wind". These songs, some of them originally Russian, evoke nostalgia for an old, beautiful Israel. In the second part of the film there are also driving sequences on the road to the hospital to which the father is admitted with a heart attack. Yitzchak fails his driving tests because of his tendency to become tearful when he gets nervous.

Pedestrians are rarely seen in this film, a fact which situates motorized traffic and drivers at its center. Driving may be defined as a kind of exploration of Israel (Yediat Ha'aretz), although it is more alienated than walking along paths, and it usually takes place in a disciplined fashion, since Yitzchak always drives along with another person: his driving instructor, or examiner, his father or the policewoman who later becomes his life-partner. He is stopped on two occasions by a policeman because of traffic offences. So, analogous with the communal singsong evenings which he runs together with his father, Yitzchak had been demanded to conquer the country and its pathways, according to a preexisting tune.

When he manages to overcome his tendency to become weepy when nervous, Yitzchak gets his precious driving license, but he obtains it by means of a bribe. "That's the way to do it" explains his driving examiner, and Yitzchak pays up, but when he drives he leaves the license behind in a drawer as an act of protest. Seeking revenge, Yitzchak pursues the examiner, dents his car and beats him up. This time he is breaking the traffic rules on the path as dictated by the film so far, although this action is sanctioned by the establishment when the policewoman arrests the sought-after examiner.

Only towards the resolution of the plot, does Yitzchak undertake his own speech act, his personal inscription in the path. The communal singsong evenings have become an entire industry, engaging a fleet of cars, one of which is driven by Yitzchak. The voice of Anat, whom Yitzchak had pursued in vain in the past, is heard on the radio. As she sings the Hebrew song "The Ballad of My Boy Who Grew Up" he stops the car at the side of the road. Yitzchak, who has trained himself not to cry in order to attain his longed for license, is at last able to cry. Now he has a license, he is alone in the car, and he chooses to stop and cry: for the death of his father, for his lost love, for the long way he has come as part of his maturing and awakening.

As opposed to the quiet, understated palette of a fast disappearing rural world in *As Tears Go By*, *Saint Clara* presents us with an artificial, heightened palette as part of anonymous video clips. Like the protagonists of Eitan Green's film, the protagonists of *Saint Clara* seek comfort in the past, which is present in particular in songs and figures from the 1950s and 60s. These are not songs of an old, lost Land of Israel, but Mike Brandt's songs and the melancholy tunes of Edith Piaf and Tisona, principle of the school boasts that Piaf wrote one of her songs following a night spent with him. There are the mythological figures of Marilyn Monroe --- after whom the Seismic Institute in the town is named, of Jean Gabin and Elvis Presley. The mathematics teacher points to the Vietnam War and the day he played chess with Bobby Fischer as the highpoints of his life.

In contrast to Yitzchak in *Tears Which Fall By Themselves*, who stubbornly tries to persevere in the way of his father, a road already paved but difficult and disappointing, the characters in Fulman and Sivan's film try to forge alternative roads. The protagonists in *Saint Clara*, Tikel, Rosie and Libbie, search out a path for themselves. The paths which have been paved for them are represented by the corridors of the Golda School, and by the main street in the town, which is constantly under threat of radioactivity from the nearby institute. The children plan and dream of revolutions and choose the swampy wood for a meeting place, while their dreams express a desire both to undermine existing education methods and to rewrite Israel's past. They use Clara's prophetic powers not only to find answers to the questions in the math test or to burn down the statue of Golda Meir in their school, but

also to burn her spirit. They do not just desire a revolution in the school, but also to drain the swamps in the town. Thus, the protagonists march along the railway tracks, sometimes cross them and sometimes march alongside them, choosing not to walk in the path which someone else had laid down for them, preferring to forge their own path.

Their elders too express dissatisfaction with the situation. No merely Tisona, the principle still dreams revolution, or Elvis, Clara's uncle, who had been previously blessed with the ability to predict the future but who has now lost his powers; many other residents of the town as well lie down on the railway tracks in despair, when the lottery, in which many of them had won, thanks to Clara's predictions, is annulled. At the climax of the plot, there are tens of cars crowding the road, trying to escape from the town, in the face of an imminent earthquake, prophesied by Clara. There are only a handful of characters on foot on the road that evening: Tikel and Clara who are hurrying to the cinema, Tisona, the school principle, and Clara's uncle Elvis. As they cross the road, Elvis is teaching Tisona a Russian song. Walking along with them are Elvis' goat, Yael, and Tisona's dog, Jean Gabin. Like the four characters in *The Wizard of Oz*, they skip along the street towards an unknown future, following their own Yellow Brick Road, refusing to be part of the "periphery which has been a let down."¹⁶

In Avraham Heffner's television drama, *A Small Country, A Big Man*, Rachele Bilu is conducting a police enquiry to discover the identity of a body. Her father, Avraham (Brahuma) Angel, is a retired school principle. Angel gradually disconnects from the world and medical tests determine that he suffers from Alzheimer's disease. He waters his drooping plants, and from time to time goes out to the nearby wadi and calls out incomprehensibly in Hebrew and Arabic. His son and daughter go looking for him, and bring him back home time and again from the paths down which he has wandered. The television invades Bruhama's home in the sleepy village with pictures of constant suicide bombings, and at the same time updates on the enquiry into the identity of one of the casualties. When a sketch of the bombing victim's face is broadcast, Brahuma says to his son, eyes fixed on the screen: "A bad man." "Who?" his son asks. "Sacher."

Sacher (magician or wizard in Arabic) is the name of the man immediately recognized by the father, but those around him dismiss what he says as meaningless. Only later does Rachele make the connection between her father and his friend Sacher, whose unidentified body lies in the pathology institute at Abu Kabir throughout the series, while a succession of widows comes to try to claim him and inherit his money. It turns out that the man who called himself various names: Avraham, Avrum, Avril, lived in various places in the world with different women and has divided his money between a number of bank accounts the world over.

The family decides to put their father in a home because of the deterioration in his condition. The night before his admission there, Rachele finds among her father's belongings an old tape in Sacher's voice; attempts to explain to her father the sins of the past, trying to make amends. Thus on the day Avraham Sacher is buried, Rachele and her father drive for the last time from Brahuma Angel's house, in the shade of the tree lined avenue. On the way, Rachele plays the tape to which, till then, her father had not wanted to listen. Half of the dirty, illegal money, says Sacher (the voice is that of Avraham Heffner, the director), belongs to Brahuma. Whether he wants it or not, he has a part in this money, and in retrospect also in the "security operations" in which he had not wanted to be involved.

The film takes place in Israel on the eve of the fourth of November 1995;¹⁷ the character of Avraham Brahma Angel may be regarded as the country's sick consciousness, the compass according to which events are defined and characters are judged. Matters concerning both the founding and the younger generation as well as the entire Zionist narrative are examined with reference to this compass. So in the concluding scene of the film, in the enclosed space of the car, the voice of the dead Sacher presents the signposts, the Orange Peel Path, which is to be followed to reach the inheritance, the road-signs to Brahma's erased brain. Thus the solution to the main riddle of the film – the identity of the unclaimed body – leads to another puzzle for Rachelle to deal with: what to do with the illegal money? Or in other words: what to do with the illegal legacy of the founding generation.

A rural sunset: nostalgia and the periphery

Who will forge the way
Tell me which path to take?
We have already gone down
Several desert and sea paths
We have already walked down some,
Our strength is running out

Where did we go wrong?
We have not yet been granted
That sunny land
We have not yet found.¹⁸

In the films examined above, paths lead to the past and highlight the tension between the path paved by the founding generation and that walked by next: the paths of communal singing and driving lessons in *As Tears Go By*; the path to the Town Hall, the school corridors and the railway tracks in *Saint Clara* and the path between valleys along which Brahma wanders and the village road by which, in his old age, he is taken from his house to a geriatric home in *A Small Country, A Big Man*. In these three films, walking along the path forces one to examine the past afresh, but with different solutions offered. In *As Tears Go By*, in a process which combines nostalgia (the communal singsong evenings) and awakening ("The Ballad of the Boy Who Grew Up"), Yitzchak tries to obtain a driving license, in order to continue along the road paved by his father. In the end he does continue in his father's footsteps, but in order to be able to do this he must bribe the driving test examiner, beat him up and marry the policewoman.

In *Saint Clara* both adults and children dream of revolution in order to escape from the economic and social desolation in which they find themselves. The path they choose to walk is one of escape, leading to an exotic though artificial world, of "stereotypical nostalgia" in Jameson's terms (1984), a nostalgia made up of cultural and cinematic images.¹⁹ In *A Small Country, A Big Man*, the path towards which the public-police enquiry leads is that of personal responsibility. The daughter, Rachelle, represses the past, while the father, who holds all the clues needed to solve today's mystery by means of the past, shuts himself away and sinks into amnesia. Nevertheless his participation in an

illicit deed escorts him, against his will, in the wadis to the home of the Arab family living in the nearby village, as well as on his final journey away from his home. From the paths and landscapes of the periphery one looks deeply into the Israeli collective mentality. The margins, it would seem, define the center, as the sideways define the main road. Raymond Williams, in *The Country and the City*²⁰ shows how geographical descriptions of landscapes in literary and cultural texts have been influenced by social changes. The dialectic between the city and the country in British culture is typical of works of the early nineteenth century. Writers dealing with the country in the main addressed urban readers, who had no first hand knowledge about country life, so that, by most contemporary readers, this way of life was considered perforce as exotic or nostalgic.

It is noteworthy that in Israel's case, the borders between country and city, between the center and the periphery are *a priori* complex. The narrator in Gutman's *The Orange Peel Path* leaves the village of Petach Tikva for Tel Aviv, although Tel Aviv of the 1920s is not necessarily today's familiar urban environment. At that time it boasted a few streets, and a number of low buildings; the town doctor was the only resident who had his own means of transport: a donkey. In the cinema of the turn of the twenty-first century on the other hand, the search for a beautiful Israel is conducted in the opposite direction, from the confines of Tel Aviv to the outside. Thus for example, in Tsahi Grad's film *Giraffes*,²¹ which in many ways conducts a an inter-textual dialogue with *The Orange Peel Path*, the heroine is accused of a murder which she did not commit and escapes from Tel Aviv assuming a fabricated identity. She signposts her route of escape by works of art which she disseminates in the city, leaving traces analogous to the orange peels the pioneers of the early twentieth-century strew along the path, while the orchard provides her with a hiding place.

In contemporary Israeli cinema, the rural periphery is portrayed as an alternative to the urban landscape, although the distinction between the two becomes ~~is~~ increasingly blurred. The periphery in crisis is portrayed not only in the three films examined here, but also in television dramas such as *Police Investigator*²² and *The Brown Girls*.²³ Given the ongoing privatization and sales of agricultural land, the urban suburb serves as a model for the rural village, despite the objections of the parental generation, a model which is gradually changing the face of the rural periphery. Moreover, the ongoing selling and development of agricultural land acts as a catalyst in the destruction of the rural idyll which is constantly being damaged by the exposure of corruption, betrayal and dark secrets.

The paths, which we have traced in the periphery evince to nostalgia and a desire to rewrite the Orange Peel Path, a desire to follow in its wake. The myth of origin and innocence associated with "The Beautiful Israel" expressed in Gutman's work is understood, as discerned by Dalia Manor, as voicing a new Hebrew spirit, which combines legend and authenticity.²⁴ *The Orange Peel Path* operates in these films as an absolute mythic space, although the paths in the Jewish village orchards -- - whether as part of a nostalgic rural landscape which it is in *As Tears Go By* and *A Small Country, A Big Man* or as part of an exotic portrayal of the margins in *Saint Clara* --- fail to rewrite that path.

What is more, the films discussed in this article depict a forbidden landscape, in which traffic is associated with sin such as the bribe with which the driving license is purchased in *As Tears Go By*, or the fraud perpetrated in *Saint Clara* and the dirty money in *A Small Country, A Big Man*. This observation is true also of films in the only dealt with in passing in this paper. In *Shuli's Boyfriend*²⁵ the

ice-cream seller assumes a fictitious identity and offers a mirage similar to the political revolution; in *The Police Investigator* and *The Brown Girls*, the sin of land sales is linked with the dark secrets of betrayal and the death of a child, while in *Giraffes*, there is the murder in a taxi, in the dark murky Tel Aviv night.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the etymology of the word "nostalgia" as a combination of the Greek *nostos* (a return home) and *algos* (pain). Nostalgia, then, is a kind of homesickness. In the films discussed, nostalgia for an innocent and beautiful Land of Israel is a device enabling one to touch on the traumatic relationship between the older and younger generations and the paths between them. The father in these films either suffers a heart attack, or amnesia, while the children either try to follow in their parents' footsteps *As Tears Go By* or attempt to escape, by means of images taken from popular culture (*Saint Clara*) or by repression *A Small Country*, *A Big Man*. The past is present, however, in flashes of memory, on the television screen, which introduces the public narrative of suicide bombings side by side with the domestic narratives of Bruhama Angel and his daughter Rachele; or the masses of residents who abandon Clara, Tisona and Tikel's development town which was their home and which let them down; or the illicit driving license and the songs which the townspeople sing regularly in Yitzchak and his father's communal singsong evenings, songs whose words clash with the monotony of their day to day reality.²⁶

The paths which are inscribed in the photo-graphy of Israeli cinema and the human activities which take place in these paths expose an unresolved ambivalence regarding place. Human movement on the paths co-exists in time and space, between present and past, rolling a utopian fantasy about the country back and forth. If the Orange Peel Path signals the distance between Israel as a physical place and Israel as "the 'big' place" or as ideal movement along the paths we have looked at is an attempt to estimate this distance. Is it still valid, and are there alternatives? In this sense, inscriptions of these paths in films function as signposts which may help us to locate the point of no return, that same traumatic point from which one can no longer continue along the mythical path which has disappointed.

¹ Nachum Gutman, *The Orange Peel Path: Adventures from the Early Days of Tel Aviv*, Tel Aviv 1958, p. 134 [Hebrew].

² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³ Zali Gurevitch and Gideon Aran, "On the Place (Israeli Anthropology)," *Alpayim* 4 (1993), p. 11 [Hebrew].

⁴ Victor Fleming (dir.), *The Wizard of Oz*, with Judy Garland, Metro-Golwyn-Mayer (MGM), USA 1939. adapted from the classic book by Frank Baum.

⁵ Doron Tsabari (dir.), *Shuli's Boyfriend (Ha-bahur Shel Shuli)*, Short Stories about Love1, with Danny Steg, Al Ahava TV & Film Productions, Channel 2, Israel, 1997.

⁶ Ram Levi (dir.), *The Police Investigator (Ho-ker Hamishtara)*, Israel 2002.

⁷ Tsahi Grad (dir.), *Giraffes (Girafot)*, with Meital Dohan, Tinkerbelle, Gal Zaid, Israel Film Fund, 2001.

⁸ Irit Linur and Ran Carmeli (dir.), *The Brown Girls (B'not Brown)*, with Yarden Bar-Kochba, Assi Dayan, Aliza Rozen, Matar Productions, Israel 2002.

⁹ Eitan Green (dir.), *As Tears Go By (Zolgot Hadma'ot Me'atzman)*, with Avi Grainik, Regev Dvash Productions, Tel Aviv, Israel 1996.

¹⁰ Ari Folman and Ori Sivan (dir.), *Saint Clara (Clara Hakedosha)*, with Lucy Dubinchik, Israeli Film Fund, 1996.

¹¹ Avraham Heffner, *A Small Country, A Big Man (Eretz Ktana, Ish Gadol)*, with Gabi Amrani, ICP, Israel 1998.

¹² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans.), Oxford 1991 [1978].

¹³ Yaakov Gilad (words) Corinne Elal (music) "The Gravel Path" [Hebrew].

¹⁴ John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Mass. 1962; Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall, Berkeley/Los Angeles/ London 1988 [1984], pp. 97-98. De Certeau makes use here of Austin's concept of utterances as individual speech acts, and transposes the concept to space.

¹⁵ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. by John Sturrock., London 1997, p. 91.

¹⁶ As Shlomo Hasson has noted in his research, the villages in the book and later in the periphery played both a practical and a symbolic role as marginal landscape. See S. Hasson, "Telling the Periphery", *Eretz Yisrael: Studies in Knowledge of the Land and Its Antiquities*, 22, The Society for Land of Israel and its Antiquities Studies 5751 (1991) [Hebrew].

¹⁷ The date of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin by Yigal Amir.

¹⁸ Shaul Tzernikovsky, "They Say There is a Land", [1923] [Hebrew], set to music by Naomi Shemer and used as the theme song in the television series *The Brown Girls* (note 8 above).

¹⁹ Frederick Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review* 146 (1984), pp. 53-92.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, London, 1973.

²¹ See note 7 above.

²² See note 6 above.

²³ See note 8 above.

²⁴ See Dahlia Manor, "There's nothing like beauties in the night: reality and imagery in descriptions of the city, the village and the Arabs in Nachum Gutman's work of the 1920s," *Studio* 105 (1999), pp. 42-51 [Hebrew].

²⁵ See note 5 above.

²⁶ The soundtrack of *The Brown Girls* also creates an ironic effect: songs of the old, beautiful Israel are heard against the background of village residents selling their agricultural land to get rich.